

## SENIOR MOMENT

*Marc Elias Keller*

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It was the day after Thanksgiving and a gray flannel sky prophesied an early snowfall. Anne Greenwood stood in her father's bathroom, twisting her long curly hair into a strict bun and meticulously tucking in the wispy graying sides. "I'm serious, Dad. I won't be back until after six tonight." Her words were perfectly clear even through a mouthful of bobby pins. "You're *sure* you can do this?"

Samuel grunted in exasperated assent to her third asking of that question. He looked after his grandson David regularly, usually just for a couple hours while Anne ran some errands, but today she'd been called in for an unexpected shift at the hospital and all the reliable sitters were booked. Much as she wanted to spend the day with David, taking him to ride on the Christmas train at the mall, she couldn't pass up the overtime pay, not after what she'd spent on Hanukkah.

Anne walked toward the door of the apartment, surveying the room like a detective, pausing to check the thermostat. "You paid the electric bill this month?"

"Yes."

"You're *sure*? Because last month—"

"I *know*," Samuel interrupted. "It was an accident. A mistake. People make them. Maybe not *you*, but—"

"All right," Anne said hurriedly. "I'm late." She dug through an aged designer purse for her car keys and then gave her father and her son a goodbye kiss. "He has his video game and some DVDs and he knows how to work the player. But no sugar. We've been doing really well with that." Anne opened the door and drew back from the bite of wintry air. "If you *really* need me, call the hospital and they'll page me."

Samuel buttoned his sand-colored cardigan with wizened hands, blotched with brown spots and crisscrossed with bluish-gray veins.

"We'll be just fine," he huffed. "Go to work."

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Their day started out, indeed, perfectly fine. David watched a movie while Samuel browsed through the paper and cleaned up from breakfast. As he finished wiping toast crumbs from the counter, his grandson came into the kitchen, holding a framed photograph of a boy and a girl building a sandcastle, their hands gloved with gloopy wet sand. They were

about six, the same age as David now, and they wore matching white tank tops emblazoned with blocky blue letters spelling out “Black Rock Bay.”

“Pop-Pop? Who’s that?”

“That’s me,” Samuel answered, putting on his glasses and smiling in surprise at the forgotten photo. It must have been hiding behind another one on the shelf. “And my sister.”

“You have a sister?”

“Well, she died before you were born.”

David looked down at the dusty picture. “And you went to the beach?”

“Every summer. To Black Rock Bay. Your mom went there, too, when she was a girl.”

Samuel reminisced to David about those summer vacations so many decades ago, first with his own parents and his sister, and then with his wife and young Anne. No matter the year, every weeklong visit to Black Rock Bay was the same. Days at the beach and nights strolling about town. Early breakfasts at Uncle Bob’s Pancakes and sunset dinners on the patio of Bayside Motel. Waiting in line at Spangler’s Creamery. Books from Happily Ever After and hermit crabs from Roy’s Emporium. Late night walks to contemplate the dark, mysterious ocean.

The boy listened for a minute and then picked up his video game.

“I liked games when I was your age, too,” Samuel said. “We’d go to Johnny’s at Black Rock Bay.”

“Johnny’s?”

“Sure. Johnny’s Arcade. We loved it there.”

David peppered him with questions and listened attentively about Skee-Ball and Whack-a-Mole. “But now they probably have video games like you play,” Samuel said.

“Like Skyjumper?”

“Well—sure. Probably.”

David leapt up from the sofa. “*Pop-Pop*. I want to go to Black Rock Bay.”

“You will, Davey boy. Your mom will take you.”

“Today, Pop-Pop. Let’s go.”

At first Samuel just laughed. But actually—why not? They had at least six hours before Anne came back and there was a nearby bus route that passed through Black Rock Bay. They could see the beach, browse the shops, have some lunch, and then ride the bus back. The boy could use something other a blinking screen in his life and Anne never let him do anything.

“All right, Davey. Let’s do it. We’ll take the bus.”

The boy jolted like ice water had been dumped on him. “*Really?*”

“Sure. Why not?”

David rushed to the bathroom while Samuel called up New Jersey Transit to check the bus schedule. The lady who answered gave him the information brusquely and mentioned it was also available online, prompting Samuel to frown at his *kaput* computer. Every time he booted it up, ominous warnings appeared on the screen. He'd designed navigation systems for the Navy and built radios from scratch—but he couldn't get rid of these damned error boxes. And calling a repair company had only led to weeks of Anne fighting to get charges reversed and then confiscating his credit card.

"I'm not a damn baby," he'd told her, just like when she'd decided his driving days were done and he'd have to rely on the paratransit van.

"I didn't say that. But you're exactly who these scammers prey on, Dad, and I can't go through this hassle again."

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For most of the bus ride toward the Jersey Shore, Samuel didn't notice the old woman across the aisle. But by the time the Black Rock Bay water tower came into sight, toothpaste-green against the gray sky, the bus was empty except for the three of them, and David had dozed off, his head pressed against the window and his small hands still gripping his handheld video game.

In the quiet of the hybrid bus, Samuel realized that the frowzy old woman was talking to herself, mumbling a cryptic monologue punctuated with pauses where a companion would have replied. She wore a frazzled brown sweater and tan slacks, heavily stained by coffee or tea, or both. Chipped eyeglasses with scratchy lenses rested crookedly on the bridge of her pale nose and her head was tilted to the slant of the glasses. Her short silvery hair was an uncombed cacophony of cowlicks.

He leaned toward the woman. "Ma'am? Everything all right?"

She looked up at him and scowled, her strong chin jutting out like the bottom of a crescent moon. Then she went on with her monologue.

Ten minutes later the bus halted at the only stop in Black Rock Bay, a bench in front of a convenience store a block off the beach. At the hiss of the air brakes the old woman stood up, disembarked with surprising agility, and quickly disappeared around the corner.

"Here we are, Davey boy," Samuel said, rising slowly, feeling pain blossom from his persnickety knees. It was a shame that Anne had waited so long to have a child and he was such an old grandfather.

As he passed the bus driver Samuel asked if the old woman was a regular rider.

"Lot of folks ride the bus, sir."

“Yes, I know that, but—do you think she should be traveling alone?”

“She paid the fare,” the driver replied absently, looking at a paper timetable clipped to the sunvisor. “We don’t ask much more than that.”

Samuel frowned. “But she might be—”

The bus driver pointed toward Second Avenue, the town’s main shopping strip. “Police station’s a few blocks down, if you want to talk to them. But I got to go.”

The accordion door snapped shut and the bus glided away toward the freeway.

David tugged on Samuel’s arm. “*Pop-Pop*. I have to go potty.”

They went into the convenience store, David taking the steps to the electronic door and Samuel shuffling up the concrete ramp. After they used the bathroom, David stopped at the deli station and started tapping at a touchscreen ordering system.

“Come on,” Samuel said, coaxing David along. “We’ll get a real lunch at Arabella’s a little later.” He tied the boy’s shoes and asked where he wanted to go first.

David squirmed excitedly. “The *arcade*.”

“All right,” Samuel laughed. “It’s just over here.”

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Johnny’s Arcade was just where Samuel remembered it, but the door was locked, the inside of the arcade very dark, and the video games and pinball machines were covered with white sheets. Taped to the door was a hand-lettered sign: “Thanks for Another Great Summer! See You Next Year.”

“*Pop-Pop*.”

“I know, Davey. Just—come here a second.”

It wasn’t just the arcade. All the shops on Second Avenue were closed. Spangler’s Creamery. Taffy’s Fudge Kitchen. Roy’s Emporium and Uncle Bob’s Pancake House. Even Arabella’s Ristorante, with its familiar red and white awning. He’d never been here at any other time than the summer and hadn’t for a moment anticipated everything being shuttered. Samuel looked again at Johnny’s Arcade, its vintage sign advertising “Electronic Games for Kids of All Ages.” These beloved places looked just like he remembered—which, he realized, was exactly what people wanted from Black Rock Bay, why they came in droves every summer and paid the high prices. The town never changed because it wasn’t a real *town*, just a seaside resort, aswarm for a season and abandoned otherwise.

“*Pop-Pop*.”

“All *right*, Davey. Don’t whine. Just give me a minute.”

Samuel fumbled for the paper schedule he'd taken from the bus. It was almost three hours until the next one and it was way too far for a taxi.

"Pop-Pop."

"Davey!"

"I'm *hungry*."

They started back down Second Avenue toward the convenience store, the old man's cranky knees complaining at every step. The sun was far behind the clouds and the breeze off the ocean made it feel much colder than back at home.

An electronic bell once again announced their entry into the convenience store. David used the touchscreen to customize a turkey hoagie as Samuel leaned against the counter, the warmth of the store a mild relief to his knees. The only other shopper was a tall man in a trucker's cap pondering over a colorful display of refrigerated sodas and energy drinks.

"What do *you* want, Pop-Pop?"

"Just do the same as you, Davey."

While the hoagies were being assembled, David picked out a bag of potato chips, a bottle of Sprite, and a pack of red licorice.

Samuel raised a gray eyebrow. "Your mom doesn't let you have that, does she?"

"Please?"

"Well"—Samuel winked, thinking of his father giving him and his sister nickels for the Fudgy-Wudgy Man—"just this once."

The convenience store didn't have a sitting area, so they went back outside, where a rush of cold air instantly nullified any lingering warmth from the store. Within earshot was the soothing susurration of the ocean and Samuel suggested they eat on the beach. "You'll like it, Davey," he said. "You can look at the waves." He led the boy up the wooden steps and then onto the empty expanse of soft sand, where they trundled down a little path bisecting shallow dunes and a sawtooth wooden fence. The salty, fishy smell of the beach was fainter in the cold weather, but still detectable.

David arranged himself on the plastic bag from the convenience store while Samuel sat down on the cold sand. The cloud cover looked even thicker over the ocean and blended in with the drab gray of the ocean. He'd never been on an empty beach and he smiled at the deserted seascape. Not a person was in sight in either direction and there wasn't a speck of litter on the sand. No airplanes with trailing banner ads for casinos and insurance companies. No portable stereos or calliopean *tweets* of lifeguards' whistles when someone went too far out in the waves. No video screens or cars or other people—just the peace and quiet of so many bygone summers at Black Rock Bay.

"Pop-Pop. I'm getting sandy."

Samuel sighed. “It’s the beach, Davey. It’s supposed to be sandy.”

After nibbling the sandwich for a few minutes and eating most of the chips, David picked up the handheld video game but then put it back down. Samuel nodded approvingly, about to praise the boy, when David told him that the batteries were dead.

“That’s all right, Davey. You don’t need to play video games now. Just enjoy—”

“*Pop-Pop*. I want to play my game.”

“All *right*. Don’t whine. They probably sell batteries at that store.” He had to go to the bathroom anyway. “Can you stay here for just *five* minutes?”

The boy nodded.

Samuel held up the pack of licorice. “If you stay *right* here and finish your sandwich, you can have this when I come back.” He heaved himself to his feet and ambled toward the wooden steps leading off the beach. When he got to the convenience store the little green bench out front was occupied—by the old woman from the bus, still talking as though she’d never stopped.

“Everything all right, ma’am?”

She looked up at him coldly. “We live in empty rooms.”

He nodded to her, went into the store and used the toilet, dispensed two cups of black coffee, and went to the register.

“And that?” The clerk nodded toward the pack of licorice.

“Oh. No. I paid for this already.”

The clerk tilted her head uneasily. “Are you sure, sir?”

“*Yes*. I was in here before. With my grandson.”

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, the clerk shrugged. “It’s fine. You can have it.” She nodded toward a waiting customer behind Samuel, another trucker.

Samuel paid for the coffees, grumbling at this chain store, thinking about Black Rock Bay’s local merchants he’d supported for decades—none who would ever accuse him of thieving a damned pack of candy.

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Outside it was snowing, lightly, the flakes sticking rapidly to the grass and more slowly to the pavement. Samuel sat down next to the woman, just to rest his knees for a moment, and held out one of the cups. “Coffee.”

She looked at him warily, her frizzy gray hair glistening with moisture, and then took the cup. “We live in empty rooms,” she said again.

Samuel smiled uneasily. “Yes, well, it’s certainly empty around *here*.”

She gazed toward the strip of closed shops. “No cinnamon buns today.”

This time he smiled genuinely: he knew exactly what she meant. Next to the arcade was a bakery: he remembered smelling pastries every morning as he walked to the beach with his sister and parents. The bakery was closed today, like everything else on Second Avenue.

“That’s right,” Samuel said, wiping snowflakes off the lenses of his glasses. “The Baker’s Dozen. Right across from the fudge shows.”

Her thin lips formed a grin. “*Freeee* samples.”

“Yep. *Freeee* samples, every night.” He smiled at the memory of him and his sister in front of Taffy’s, eagerly plucking tiny cubes of fudge from the big silver tray.

A young Hispanic man dressed in paint-splattered canvas overalls walked into the convenience store while looking at his phone, and Samuel suddenly remembered—David and the video game batteries. Damn it, how long had it been? He stood up frantically, stumbling at the sharp pain in his knee and clutching the old woman’s shoulder to steady himself. She dropped her cup and coffee splashed over her shoes.

“No, no, no, no,” she moaned, stomping her feet.

“Come with me for now,” Samuel said, grabbing her icicle fingers and pulling her toward the beach. He hustled her up the wooden steps and then onto the sand.

“*Davey boy!*”

This was the right spot: despite the thin layer of snow, he saw the plastic bag from the convenience store and the white deli paper that had been wrapped around the hoagies. But David himself was nowhere to be seen.

Samuel strained to look into the ocean—“*David!*”—and then stared hard in both directions down the empty beach. “Look for a little boy!” he yelled at the old woman. “*Look!*”

“There *are* no boys in this world!” she screeched, sitting down in the sand.

“*DA-VID!*”—but most of Samuel’s cry was lost between the white noise of the waves and the wind. Most likely, he thought, David went looking for him and turned the wrong way, away from the convenience store.

“Let’s go,” Samuel said, pulling the woman’s hand. “Damn it, let’s go.” He yanked on her arm again, but this time she yanked back. His knees flared up in agony and he toppled forward onto the frosty sand. Samuel fumbled to put his glasses back on and waited for the wave of pain to recede so he could stand up. He felt like he was about to cry for the first time since his wife died four years ago.

“*DA-VID!*” He looked back at the old woman. “*Help me!*”

She clawed up some sand and threw it in his face.

Suddenly the dull noise of the wind and waves was slashed by a loud electronic chirp and the snowy air was lit up by red and blue flashes. Moments later, two police officers, a man and a woman, and David, with a cut on his cheek and wrapped in a ratty brown blanket, appeared at the top of the wooden steps.

Samuel leaned forward in relief. “Davey!”

The male cop walked forward and held out his hands. His nameplate said “Delmonico.” “Sir—just stay seated for a moment.”

Delmonico peered curiously at Samuel and the old woman, side by side in the snowy sand. The other cop, the woman, brought David forward. She pointed to Samuel and David nodded.

“You’re his grandfather?” Delmonico asked Samuel, who nodded.

Delmonico asked for ID and then looked over at the old woman. “Ma’am? What’s your name, ma’am?” The officer waved his hand in front of her face when she didn’t reply.

“What’s her name?” he asked Samuel.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I—I just met her today.”

Delmonico frowned and helped Samuel to his feet. “All right. Let’s sort it out in the station. At least it’ll be warm.”

The old woman let Delmonico grip her forearm and lead her toward the wooden steps. Samuel asked what happened to David’s face and the woman officer said that David said he’d tripped going up the wooden steps.

“Did you strike the boy, sir?” she asked.

“Of course not.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes.” When Samuel was near David he put his hand on the boy’s bony shoulder.

“Everything’ll be fine, Davey boy,” he said.

David squirmed away from Samuel. “Pop-Pop?”

“Yes?”

“I hate you!”

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The ride to the Black Rock Bay police station took less than three minutes. The woman officer led David and the old woman to separate rooms and Delmonico stayed with Samuel in a little lobby to keep asking him about the old woman, who hadn’t said a word since the

police came onto the beach. It was warm in the station and Samuel took off his overcoat, noticing Delmonico smile at his plaid-shirt-and-suspenders outfit.

“All I know is that she took the bus—”

The woman officer came into the lobby. “She’s from Crestview.”

“Him too?” Delmonico asked, nodding toward Samuel.

“No, they don’t have a record of him.”

“I don’t *live* there,” Samuel interjected testily.

Delmonico nodded dismissively and poured himself a mug of coffee, taking a sugar packet from a souvenir tin that used to hold salt water taffy. “Have Greg ride her back,” he told the woman officer. “How about the kid’s mother?”

“Voicemail.”

“She doesn’t answer her phone at work,” Samuel muttered. It occurred to him that when he’d visited Black Rock Bay as a child David’s age, his family didn’t touch a phone for an entire week.

“Where’s work?” Delmonico asked.

Samuel hesitated. “You know, this is all silly. I can just take him back on the bus and his mother will come to my apartment.”

Delmonico shook his head and spoke with surprising gentleness. “I’m sure you understand, sir, why I can’t release the boy back into your custody.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not if you help us make sure the boy’s safe.”

Samuel stared down at the gray plastic table and thought about the empty beach. “I just lost track of time,” he muttered.

Delmonico smiled. “Senior moment?” Then he leaned closer and spoke sternly. “Anyway, sir—it really would be better for you and your grandson if you help us out.” He sipped his coffee and ripped open another sugar packet.

“She’s a nurse,” Samuel finally offered. “At St. Paul’s. Anne Greenwood.”

Delmonico made a note on a brown paper napkin. “How about the father?”

“He lives in Florida.”

“Anyone else come down here today?”

“Just me and David.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” Samuel snapped. “I just wanted to show him Black Rock Bay.”

Delmonico chuckled. “In November? What’d you think you’d see?”

Then the officer left to make the call and there was nothing for Samuel to do but wait until Anne arrived. It didn’t matter, anyway, whether or not he was under arrest. He knew

where he was headed: with the old woman in Crestview Care Center, where they put old folks like him who'd made too many mistakes, whose minds were fast becoming unfixable *kaput* computers. Crestview—where the residents wore bibs at mealtimes whether they wanted to or not. He'd seen those bibs when he'd visited an old Navy buddy, those brown oblong bibs with Velcro straps.

But Anne would say she had no other choice to make sure he was properly cared for. She was a nurse, after all, and that's how she divided up the world: those who could care for themselves and those who couldn't.

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When Anne rushed into the police station, in a trim burgundy coat over her nurse's tunic and scrubs, she was as distraught as expected, huffing out her answers to Delmonico's questions and ignoring Samuel to go and comfort David in the other room. After a few minutes, she came out, scowling, and approached her father.

Samuel stood up and started buttoning up his old overcoat, avoiding his daughter's eyes. "It's not as bad as it looks, Anne."

"No?" She flashed a white business card with a name and contact information under "Bergen County Family Services." "Now let's go," she hissed, tucking a frizzy lock of hair behind her ear. "Before the roads get even worse."

Anne signed a form at what looked like a bank teller's window near the door of the police station and then bundled up David, who was holding a half-eaten candy bar. "Honey, where's your video game?"

"I dropped it," he sniffled. "When I fell."

"I'll buy him a new one," Samuel said quickly. Stepping carefully on the wet pavement, he settled into the front passenger seat and David climbed in the back.

"Buckle up," Anne ordered. "Both of you." She drove slowly out of the parking lot, two hands gripping the wheel, frequently glancing at David in the rearview mirror.

Samuel looked out at the darkened storefronts along Second Avenue. Roy's Emporium. Johnny's Arcade. The Baker's Dozen and Taffy's Fudge Kitchen. All empty and hibernating now, their awnings sagging under the accumulating snow. It struck him for a moment that the resort town, ghostly and inutile for three seasons a year, was, perhaps, something of a waste of space. But nevertheless, just before the car turned onto the freeway, Samuel opened his window for one last sniff of Black Rock Bay. Anne instantly felt the chill invade the car, glanced over unamused, and closed her father's window with a button on her door. Then she locked the car windows and drove toward home.